



Hebridean Hostellers

Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust
www.gatliff.org.uk

Newsletter 75

Spring 2024

Work-party volunteer, Neil Hughes, helping to lay replacement pipework at Rhenigidale in 2022

Photograph by Mary Hughes

From the Chair - The Hostels and You

Peter Clarke writes: ‘I look back on 2023 with great satisfaction. Fingers crossed, for it looks as if we can put the Covid pandemic behind us. Everything ran smoothly, and we are getting work done at all the hostels. Hostel overnights are lower than pre-Covid years, but the trend is upwards.

But why do I write ‘With great satisfaction’? Well, the truth is that I have always derived enormous fulfilment from being involved with the hostels. Yes, it takes effort and time, but the Outer Hebrides are very special. It is a **privilege** to be a Trustee of a body which provides refreshment, comfort and joy to hostellers and makes such a direct and sustained impact on the local economy.

So, why not come and join us on the Board of Directors? If you have a love, dare I say, passion, for the islands and the hostels, you are half-way there. No previous experience is necessary, but I know that there are people in our membership who have the necessary skills: they have been an elected member of a local authority, they have been company secretaries or held down responsible jobs in their own spheres. It is surprising how **transferable** this experience is!

Some typical questions.

Q: I can't spend that much **time** at the hostels.

A: Most of the work is done at home. Visits to the hostels have to be carefully planned beforehand, in view of time and expense.

Q: Will I be overwhelmed by the **responsibilities**?

A: No. In the first instance all you need is to read the Board papers, understand them and make comments based on your experience and judgement. When you are ready you can always shadow an existing office holder.

Q: I am not good at DIY, so I would be hopeless at **maintaining** the hostels.

A: Much work at the hostels is now done by local contractors. But plenty of other skills are required, such as organising events, managing people and using computers. There are plenty of emails to answer from hostellers. All planning and building warrant applications are online these days.

Q: I can't afford to **travel** to the islands.

A: if you are on Trust business our expenses policy covers this. Copies of this policy are available upon request.

The Trust is solvent; there is plenty of work to do. Many hands make **light** work!

Thirty Years On and the Trove Grows

It is one of those anomalies of life that **Marc Calhoun**, a native and resident of Seattle, should in the 1980s have become attracted to the Scottish islands. Not only has he developed a passion for them but has become a published authority and a much-read author. In terms of achievement this is a case of 'above and beyond'; in the sense of coverage of a topic it's a matter of 'around and beyond'.

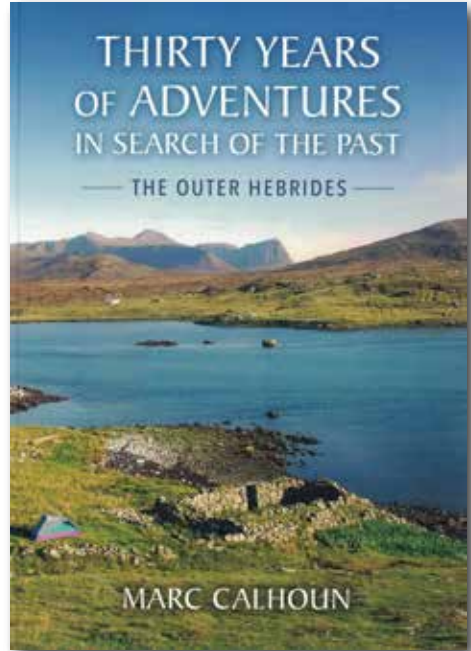
The appearance of his book, *Thirty Years Of Adventures In Search Of The Past - The Outer Hebrides*, has brought its publisher, The Islands Book Trust, back into its original mainstream activity, for this is a 322-page, lavishly-illustrated **compendium** for island devotees and a bargain at £20. It's a trove of insights, information and incentives for Hebridean explorers.

The title incorporates the word '**Past**', which is presented from a variety of angles. Here are the geological aspects, with some of the world's oldest rocks described; the historical dimensions of the rise of a specific area featured; social developments analysed; literary visitors and their references detailed; personal contacts, opinions and attitudes of personal contacts entertainingly reported.

This is not a gazetteer, for there are areas, particularly well-documented ones, not mentioned. **Gatliff** enthusiasts can delve into material on Rhenigidale and its surroundings, learn much about the island of Berneray and discover a remarkable amount about the former hostel on Scarp. They will not be enlightened from this source about Howmore, however.

What appeals to me about this book is the encouragement it gives to **future**, individual adventures. I am happy to read about desolate terrain in and around Kinlochresort, for example, but I am not sufficiently intrepid to venture there. However, such a place as Laimisheadair, with connections to St Ciaran, is just to the south of our former Garenin hostel and is now on my expeditionary list.

Celebrities are sometimes extolled to us as national 'treasures', when 'trinkets' would be more accurate. Marc is a local treasure whose published work is a valuable collection, indeed a trove. Employ a search engine or go direct via islandsbooktrust.org to **purchase** through The Islands Book Trust. Your time and money will be well spent.



Forty Years Ago in The Pairc

Stephen Moss writes: ‘The article in the last Newsletter about the plan to charter a boat from Rhenigidale to explore The Pairc in 2024 had me reaching for my old OS maps, as I spent several days exploring this area in May 1984, following a week in The Cuillins. I stayed at Rhenigidale hostel and recall the warden, **Roddy MacInnes**, painting wooden fences a lurid shade of green and running out of paint.



Photograph by Marc Calhoun

He said he would have to walk into Tarbert the next day to get some more - this was **‘pre-road’** times. I always recall this incident when in a similar position, as it tempers my ‘self-annoyance’ at the ‘inconvenience’. Here, in Hertfordshire, there are numerous places to buy paint within 30 minutes’ drive, whereas for Roddy it would have been an all-day round trip.

Kenny MacKay, the then postman, took me across Loch Seaforth to The Pairc in his dinghy. He wouldn’t take any payment for this, so I gave the money to the girl who accompanied us - his daughter, I presume. I clearly remember watching the dinghy disappear from view on its return to Rhenigidale.

I had that feeling of ‘Well, you’re really on your own now’ which many others have experienced when disembarking, alone, on an unfamiliar shore. And so it was - I literally saw no one for four days as I explored The Pairc. I look upon this as one of my greatest walking achievements. Some people may consider it a distinctly ‘odd’ accomplishment, but readers of this newsletter may well **identify** with the sentiment.

I was intrigued by a small area which was shown, and still is, as ‘wooded’ on the 1:25,000 OS map, right in the middle of this **wilderness**. I camped by the stream at this idyllic spot (map ref NB271083, 2 km SE of Beinn Mhor) for three nights. From that base I explored south to the cottage at Bhalamus (Valamus) and east to Mul Thàgaraidh (Mulhagery), once possibly the most remote shepherd’s house in Britain.

The newsletter editor recalls a current CalMac crew member saying that his grandmother-in-law was born there. Not a place for a ‘difficult’ birth, one thinks! The terrain was largely trackless, of course, which made for slow going, but the weather was good and I greatly enjoyed exploring, seeing lots of red deer and reflecting on the hard lives of the past inhabitants of these **remote** parts.

I eventually exited via Eishken where a group of local lads gave me a lift back to the main road. I did not forget to phone Kenny, as he requested, to let him know I had survived without mishap. Then it was off to the ferry at Tarbert and the end of a truly **memorable** holiday.

How do The Cuillins and The Pairc compare for a true ‘wilderness’ experience? I reckon The Pairc **wins** hands down!

Go Seaforth - The May Expedition

The expedition proposed in the last edition will take place on either Wednesday 15 or Thursday 16 May, subject to weather conditions, **departing** from Rhenigidale and passing Molinginish before crossing open waters to land at Mulhagery before visiting further settlements in The Pairc, at Brollum and Valamus. If time permits on the eight-hour trip, there will be a cruise up Loch Seaforth.

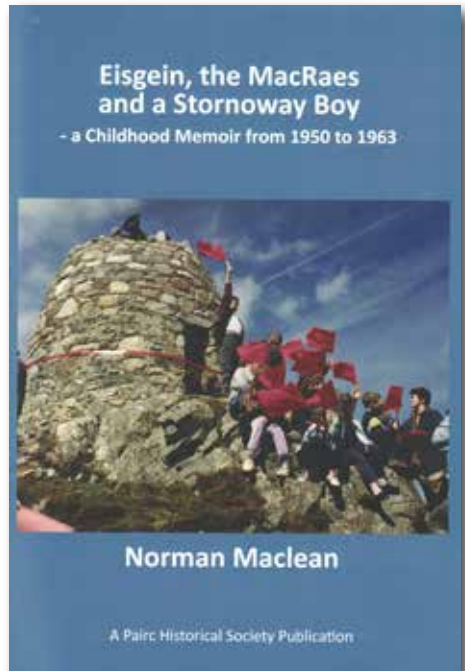
There are a couple of places left to be filled. If you fancy a journey into the relatively **unknown**, please consider joining the group to see one of the most extensive uninhabited districts in Britain. The individual fee for this unusual full day-out is £100 and accommodation is available at our hostel. If interested, contact the Editor, whose details are on the back page.

Scenic and Historical

If you are travelling along the Stornoway to Tarbert road, it's worth creating time for a side-trip from the junction at Balallan on the B8060. First there are **opportunities** for refreshment at the bar and restaurant of the Loch Erisort Hotel and then at the cafe and grocery store at the Ravenspoint Centre. The road to Cromore and Marvig loops around to Gravir, which serves Lemreway and Orinsay, and can be reached directly.

The now deserted village of Steimreway was occupied into the 1940s and it's worth walking over the track to see its setting beside a **picturesque** lagoon. This area is served by Comunn Eachdraidh na Pairc Historical Society, with its quarterly magazine, *Tional*. Details are to be found at cepairc.com of events, publications and contacts.

Gaelic has a stronger spoken rather than a written emphasis and so insights into the past can be short-lived and liable to be lost. Norman Maclean has documented his memories of the 1950 to 1963 period with a Childhood Memoir, which focuses on local people, conditions and places that have ways of changing as time goes by. Records of them are **preserved** in print.



Be Aware of Award

The competition for young writers, featured in the recent editions of *Hebridean Hostellers*, drew 13 entries which much impressed the judges. The winner was **Sam Brown**, from South London, and his article will be published in the August / September 2024 issue of *Scottish Islands Explorer*, on sale in July and available from many newsagents in the UK.

That magazine has an **attractive** promotion of a 30% saving on a two-year subscription via chris@selectps.com or by phoning 01202 586848. There's also another attractive prospect, of all competition entries being published this summer, either online or in print, as a way of promoting our hostels, particularly to younger visitors. There was a time when youth hostelling was a rite of passage for many. No longer, alas!

Extending Knowledge of an Extensive Area

The Aberdeen-based daily newspaper, *The Press and Journal*, covers a vast swathe of the Scottish mainland, as well as the Northern and Western Isles. It was founded in 1747 and currently brings out six geographical editions to cater for city and distant readers. You can peruse them on the internet and **expand** your knowledge of the districts in which the Gatliff hostels are situated.

Weekly newspapers now serving the Outer Hebrides are mainly products of the 20th Century and have, in recent times, adapted their appeal to those willing to access copy digitally. *The Stornoway Gazette* (1917) sells throughout the 130-mile long Outer Hebrides while the *West Highland Free Press* (1972), based in Broadford, Skye, focuses primarily on the islands and the mainland's Wester Ross.

Am Pàipear (1972) is an award-winning paper produced from an office in Ballivanich, Benbecula, and is particularly popular in the Uists, where Berneray and Howmore are situated. *The Oban Times* (1861) has a long history and covers much of the west coast and its islands. This **compilation** of titles indicates that there are many column inches to be explored, all within easy reach of keyboard and screen.



From the *Hebridean Hostellers* Issue of Five Years Ago ...

‘How Herbert Gatliff would be delighted to see **Rhenigidale** featured in the forthcoming 13th edition of the Lonely Planet travel guide to Great Britain. (Editor: John Humphries) [*Success of sorts*]

and of Ten Years Ago ...

‘We do not know when the first chapel was built at **Howmore**, but a stone slab incised with an outlined cross suggests a Christian presence since before the 9th Century.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Ecclesiastical interests for 1250 years*]

Fifteen ...

‘The Gatliff Cookery Competition for 2008 drew a number of entries and obviously gave much pleasure. The team of Daniel Behnke and Belinda Allen stayed in on a wet and windy day at **Berneray** and prepared a Scottish-Swabian ‘fusion dish’ based on beef bouillon.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Six hostel cooks won £25 each*]

Twenty ...

‘The membership of the GHHT has remained stable at around 250 despite the increase in the annual **subscription** to £10.’ (Editor: John Humphries) [*Inflationary pressures are a constant factor*]

Twenty-five ...

‘This summer will see the **installation** of new windows in the hostel at Berneray. This is a job which has to be done during the summer months when it is (hopefully) dry and should cause no inconvenience to hostellers.’ (Editor: Jim McFarlane) [*Watch this space for a repeat in the Summer of 2049 after this year’s replacement*]



Berneray in summery conditions

Thirty ...

‘Howmore renovation is proceeding very well. Most of the **legal** / local authority issues have been dealt with and difficulties over the historically defined and actual access to the hostel have been resolved, giving Deidre Forsyth one last round of legal activity to pursue.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Planning and conundrums*]

Thirty-five ...

‘You may have heard that there are plans for a hostel at **Garenin** in West Lewis.’ (Editor: Richard Genner) [*Things come to pass and eventual impasse*]

... and Forty

‘The **inaugural** meeting of the Hebridean Hostellers will take place on Saturday 21 July 1984 at 158 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1.’ (Editor: Peter Clarke) [*Every organisation begins somewhere and where better than close to the Palace?*]

Rhenigidale – North Harris

Berneray – North Uist

Howmore – South Uist



AGM - A Good Mission

This year's AGM of the Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust will be held on Saturday 6 July at the Parish Rooms, in **Penrith**, starting at 10.00. Here is a bustling market town, with a population of 17,000, a massive 14th Century castle and a number of sandstone buildings which hide intriguing lanes and alleyways. In Cumbria's Eden Valley, it is just three miles from the boundaries of the Lake District. Details of, and directions to, the Penrith venue can be found at <https://theroomspenrith.org.uk>

Many young people started their hostelling experience in the Lakes and memories of those times linger. Here is an opportunity to book a mid-week stay in those iconic parts and attend the Saturday meeting to assist those who are keeping the **vision** of traditional hostelling alive. That's our mission. The Youth Hostel movement is still relatively young, with the YHA's centenary at around the end of this decade.

Eight Years On

The concept of The Hebridean Way was conceived long ago by Peter Clarke, but the dual routes for cycling and walking were not completed until 2016. Since then they have grown in popularity. It's worth recognising the **significance** of our hostels at Howmore and Berneray on the ten islands, six causeways and two ferries that are a part of the venture. One nestles on the machair; the other is at a significant junction. Rhenigidale can, with a detour, play its part.
